

## The Long Not So Idyllic Descent of Woodstock NY

by Peter Stone Brown

### Small Town Talk

by Barney Hoskyns (Da Capo Press)

Fairly early in Bob Dylan's career, word leaked out that he liked to spend a lot of time in a small town, in fact pretty much a village about 100 miles north of New York City, where his manager Albert Grossman owned a house. Woodstock was known as an artistic community and had been for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, though the artists weren't necessarily musicians. For the first part of the decade, it wasn't that big a deal, there weren't hordes of people going to Woodstock in search of Dylan and the great answer he had no intention of ever providing. By the end of the 1960s, things had changed.

*Small Town Talk* (the title taken from a song of the same name written by Rick Danko and Bobby Charles) is an in-depth look at the Woodstock music scene, that also provides a history of the artistic inclinations of the town itself and in sort of a roundabout way is also as close as we are probably going to get to a biography of Albert B. Grossman, who in a roundabout way may have been responsible for a music scene happening in Woodstock to begin with.

The list of musicians who lived in or near Woodstock at one time or another over the past 50 years is extensive to say the least and includes such names as Charles Mingus, Jimi Hendrix and David Bowie.

Albert Grossman was the major manager of folk musicians in the '60s. His stable of artists included Odetta, Peter, Paul & Mary, Bob Dylan, Ian & Sylvia, Gordon Lightfoot, The Paul Butterfield Blues Band, The Band, and Janis Joplin among several others. Grossman's thing was getting his artists out of clubs and onto the concert stage, and he pulled this off in a number of ways, and one was referring to his clients as artists. His commission was at least ten percent higher than the industry standard, with additional percentages for recordings and publishing. He did this with a combination of arrogance, intimidation and eccentricity. One of his favorite tactics was going to contract negotiation meetings and saying absolutely nothing. He was a complicated person to say the least. He could be very generous and help out people who'd fallen on hard times, and he could also be a total

prick. His vision for Woodstock was for it to be a place where his artists could create unimpeded. His original plan was to try to get his artists all onto the same label, and when that didn't quite work out, he started his own label. The sad irony in all this is by the time the studio was finished, and by the time the record label really got going, the people he built the studio for and created the label for were either gone, on their way out the door or simply too messed up to use it.

Bob Dylan's motorcycle accident and the seclusion that followed, coming a few weeks after the release of *Blonde On Blonde* probably did more to attract people to Woodstock to seek him out than if he'd stayed visible. Whether the number of intruders were as great as Dylan claimed (some people in a position to know dispute this) we'll probably never know though Dylan did come home more than once to find strangers in his house and even in his bed.

In 1968, The Band released their debut *Music From Big Pink*. It didn't take people long to figure out that the West Saugerties mentioned in the liner notes was next to Woodstock, and a lot of people started thinking that maybe getting a house in the country and forming a band wasn't a bad idea.

In the spring of 1969, my brother did just that, and I would go up to visit, riding the bus from New York City usually sitting next to and conversing with Joe Morgenstern, the film critic for *Newsweek* who was married to actress Piper Laurie though I didn't find out who he was until later. There was something mystical, magical and inspirational about the mountains in Woodstock. Bob Dylan hung over the town like a cloud. You never saw him and he was gone by the end of the year. You felt like you were invading if you mentioned his name in public. You didn't see Albert Grossman either, but you could feel his power especially when you passed the complex of buildings he was creating in Bearsville just outside Woodstock proper. Once in a while you might see Rick Danko tooling around in a maroon '54 Continental with a porthole window or Garth Hudson driving by in a Mercedes. It took a couple of years of going up there before I encountered Robbie Robertson while I was coming out of the Bearsville General Store and he was coming in. His vibe was totally "I know you know who I am and you are not going to say a thing." I pretended I didn't know who he was, but I did stop getting into the car I was driving when I realized Robertson was driving Dylan's 1964 Ford station wagon, the one according to some people he wrote "Chimes of Freedom" in while traveling across the country.

Also in the spring of 1969 a guy named Michael Lang along with a guy named Artie Kornfeld decided that a music festival in Woodstock would be a good thing and they had people with money backing them. The town of Woodstock freaked and said absolutely not. Lang eventually had his festival, but it was 60 miles away in a different county in Bethel. The name

was all about Dylan of course, and Lang called the festival “The Woodstock Music and Arts Fair” anyway. I was living in New York City on the edge of Harlem where you’d keep five bucks in your wallet as payoff money, and the rest of your money in your boot. The word on the street was the Woodstock festival was a rip off. I went to California. Bob Dylan decided to play his first full concert in three years in England at the Isle of Wight. The Band played Woodstock and backed Dylan at the Isle of Wight in addition to doing their own set. There actually was a festival in Woodstock that took place on weekends. I went to one my brother’s band played at. For a few bucks you could sit in a field and see Paul Butterfield, Tim Hardin, Don Cherry, Happy & Artie Traum, and an Irish guy who’d just arrived from Cambridge, Massachusetts named Van Morrison.

After my brother’s band had been living in Woodstock for a couple of months, one of the guys said to me, “Every week you see another Band car totally wrecked at the gas station.” Hoskyns wrote the definitive book on The Band in 1993 and he gets in just as deep here, while covering several other major players in Woodstock as well as devoting a chapter to the jazz scene.

There was a Woodstock scene with a lot of performers playing what now is called “Americana Music” and it took place in about three bars and behind closed doors in people’s living rooms. There was a definite sound exemplified by The Band, but also heard in the records of Happy and Artie Traum, Bobby Charles, and Roger Tillison. The record companies never really picked up on the Woodstock sound the way they did on other places. One person not playing Americana or anything close, but prominently featured in the book is Todd Rundgren, who doesn’t fit musically or otherwise except he’s part of the story. Originally in the Philadelphia band, Nazz, Rundgren camped out in Grossman’s Manhattan office until he was noticed. Rundgren was a pop music genius and a wiz in the recording studio. Grossman installed him as the chief engineer at Bearsville, and among his first projects were Ian and Sylvia’s *Great Speckled Bird*, Jesse Winchester’s debut album, and The Band’s third album *Stage Fright*. There are interesting and funny stories included about all three projects.

Hoskyns, who lived in Woodstock for a period of time did an extensive amount of research which is documented in the book. From what I can tell, he only gets a couple of things wrong. For whatever reason he seems to think Van Morrison didn’t produce *Moondance* when it says “produced by Van Morrison” right on the cover. This is brought up while talking about the follow up to *Moondance*, the not as good *His Band And Street Choir*. I got to meet and know Van Morrison a little bit during the time he lived in Woodstock, and happened to be around when *Moondance* came out and heard him talk about how he produced and mix the album.

As to other things in the book, apparently Hoskyns has touched a nerve some people didn't want touched. But I made a conscious decision to write this review first and then find out what might not be true amidst the gossip.

Van Morrison and Bob Dylan got out before things got really bad. Some people stayed anyway.

Grossman lost Dylan primarily over publishing, resulting in lawsuits that went on for years. Grossman lost interest in managing after Janis Joplin died, and left it up to partners and others. He was more interested in his studio or was it his restaurant or was it his café? He was continually starting new projects before finishing old ones, and never knew how to run a record company and left the studio up to others. Grossman died of a heart attack en route to London on a Concorde. Some say Woodstock was never the same.

Ultimately Woodstock was a place where a certain kind of hipness ruled and if you weren't drunk and screwing someone else's wife, you weren't cool. *Small Town Talk* is loaded with legendary stories of rock and roll, some funny, some crazy, but ultimately quite sad and depressing. While cocaine played a big factor, the main culprit is heroin. It's not fun to find your musical heroes doing things you wish they weren't doing, but all three singers of The Band were junkies and so were a lot of other people.

Does Hoskyns capture some of the Woodstock I experienced? Quite a bit of it. And there's quite a few stories I didn't know. Once the people I knew were no longer living in Woodstock, I didn't go back for more than 20 years. When I did, I was kind of amazed to see there were still hippies hanging out on the green in the center of town.

**Peter Stone Brown** is a freelance writer and singer-songwriter. His site and blog can be found here: <http://www.peterstonebrown.com/>

